

COMMENTARY: CURRICULUM REVISION CRITIQUE: A RESPONSE TO CLARK

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John Clark has written on perceived shortcomings in the Curriculum Stocktake Report (Ministry of Education, 2002).

He has argued that the report is flawed because first, it did not result from a process that included philosophical scrutiny; and second, it demonstrates muddled thinking.

This response to the Clark paper takes up some of his criticisms.

It is worth rehearsing the short historical background leading to the curriculum changes now being considered at a national level. The decade of the 1980s was one of curriculum reviews including and investigation of the core curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1984), a review of the whole curriculum (Department of Education, 1987) referred to as the 'curriculum review', and proposals for a new curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1988).

Together the proposals in these reviews reflected divergent views on the intentions and form of any new national curriculum. The Curriculum Review, for example, included numerous quotations from a broad public spectrum in reference to many aspects of curriculum. There were contrasting views from organizations, groups and individuals about what should be taught to New Zealand students, and why and how. Some views might be regarded as conservative, others as progressive or liberal (and many more in between). Taken together, the advocacy was for a broad, general education leading to senior secondary school specialization.

None of the 1980s reviews led, in themselves, directly to national curriculum change. In them, however, were the seeds of what was to follow in the 1990s: concerns that national curriculum might have become disconnected and "bitsy", goals that were indistinct and unfocused, calls for greater parental decision – making about school learning programmes, and teachers who needed clearer guidelines to plan school programmes. A new government in 1990 embarked upon an ambitious plan to rewrite the entire curriculum in a couple of years. A curriculum framework (Ministry of Education, 1993a) outlined the intentions and structural elements of seven subjects (called curriculum areas). Over about eight years (longer than the original ambitious timeline) teachers received all seven documents that formed the basis of a Year 1 to 13 curriculum.

In 2000 the Ministry of Education undertook a process called The Curriculum Stocktake. It began with a group of sector representatives providing feedback to the Ministry about how the national curriculum documents were perceived and implemented in schools. A large-scale research project was undertaken from 2001 to obtain teachers' perceptions of their implementation experiences and their views of the national documents themselves. International assessment data also provided achievement evidence. In September 2002, the Ministry of Education reported to the Minister of Education. The report covered changes that have occurred since the new curriculum statements first appeared in schools (for example, a diversifying student population) and an analysis of how the documents might contribute to enhanced educational achievement. A number of recommendations were made about changes to the English and Māori frameworks and supplementary notes for some of the seven curriculum statements.

An impression in Clark's article is that wholesale changes are to be made to the national curriculum. This is not the case. The report is clear in recommending that the seven curriculum areas statements are to remain. Thus the 'time for consolidation and reflection' that Clark refers to can occur. Indeed, it has been occurring for the earlier curriculum areas which were introduced over a decade ago.

A major recommendation to the Minister was to re-work the two basic frameworks, *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education, 1993a) and *Te Anga Marautanga o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education, 1993b). In short, it was recommended that virtually all sections of the framework be retained but modified and re-written to form the basis of a revised statement to be gazetted in 2006 under amendments to the Education Act in 1998 and 2001. Recommended additions to a revised framework included links between early childhood and school curriculum documents and a clearer statement of education purposes. A feature of the recommendations is that the revised curriculum area statements in the framework should focus upon aims and objectives. The Ministry established groups (mainly teachers) some time ago to begin this work.

To return now to Clark's views. He is quite correct in his argument that the contributions of philosophers of education are important in curriculum revision of this kind (for example, the recasting of aims, objectives and principles). Clark criticises the curriculum stocktake process that led to the stocktake report for not dealing with philosophical and epistemological issues. He is wrong. In meetings

of the stocktake group, a lot of time was devoted to discussions of the principles underlying the curriculum framework and their relationship with aims, objectives and content. As a participant in these discussions it was brought home to me again (not that I needed any reminding) that such discussions are incredibly important. They uncover the complexity of viewpoints from participants' own views and beliefs, as well as those viewpoints from stakeholder groups such as employers and employees, ethnic groups, those involved professionally in education, and "academics." They reveal the divergence of understandings of terms and their (sometimes) multiple meanings, and how it is necessary to debate at length in an attempt to resolve differences to eventually arrive at a national curriculum. Some differences are never fully resolved.

Clark suggested that there was some kind of plot by the Ministry (his 'sinister conclusion') to avoid any criticism of the current national curriculum 'in a climate of political correctness'. I find the latter reference somewhat absurd ---- what does the philosopher of education mean by this? In its discussions, the Curriculum Stocktake Reference Group ---- as I indicated above ---- debated the kinds of issues raised in the earlier *Delta* papers referred to by Clark: curriculum levels, assessment, achievement objectives and so on. It was impossible to fully resolve our debates by formulating agreed statements that might be included in a national curriculum framework. And that is the nature of curriculum development and change, as I am sure Clark agrees. Curriculum development is political; it is value-laden; it is both rational and irrational. After all, the fundamental pursuit in the development of school curriculum is Herbert Spencer's epistemological question, 'What knowledge is of most worth?' And not everyone agrees on the answer; for example, Spencer's own argument that science is the most important subject (and therefore should take the pre-eminent position in school curriculum) (Spencer, 1860). Ask a range of citizens what they consider the best answer, and the variation will be enormous ---- especially in a culturally diverse society such as ours. Some answers will come from beliefs that the employment-related knowledge or learning is important in a school curriculum; others might come from a culture-based perspective, others from a liberal arts subject perspective, others who see science as a paramount perspective (as Spencer did), and so on (see Spencer, 1860).

Given the difficulty of arriving at coherent answers (and this is different from saying there are no answers), having philosophers involved in discussion related to curriculum reform is a good (may be even essential) idea. Philosophers can help with meanings of terms and concepts, analysis of argument, and so on. But let us not get carried away with any idea that if a group of philosophers of education is put in the same room, curriculum policy matters will be resolved into coherent, consistent statements. Sure, they can and will help. But the reality of a contemporary multicultural democracy like New Zealand is that there are many groups competing for their perceived rights to be recognised in the school curriculum. There are elements of relativism and subjectivity. Applying 'objective' criteria to make judgments about the validity and worth of competing demands is not impossible, but it is extremely difficult. That is why any national curriculum has been arrived at through compromises. Curriculum is always problematic.

I find Clark's criticisms of the *Curriculum Stocktake Report* section on outcomes to be somewhat unfair. To me, the report quite rightly outlines how national student achievement levels benchmark against other countries. Surely this is important? Rather than being 'dreadfully wrong' as he suggests, the benchmarking and NEMP data form just one dimension of the assessment of student learning. The report points out that while we know a lot about classroom strategies of teaching linked to achievement, a lot more knowledge is needed. It is of public interest to know whether New Zealand students' performance in international measures is sustained over time.

I will not take up the numerous other criticisms made of the report. Rather, I will confine myself in this concluding part of my response to some observations regarding Clark's conclusion section. The report to the Minister is attacked because it was seen to be "tinkering with bits and pieces" and that there was no thorough evaluation. To some extent it is tinkering in that there will not be a new national curriculum. But there is nothing wrong with capitalising on what is all right about the current curriculum and changing the aspects that need to be changed. To say that here has been 'muddled thinking' is to insult the many people who spent time looking at the curriculum framework. It should also be remembered, that the report did not propose the solutions. It identified what needs to be subjected to further study and analysis to arrive at a more coherent framework.

The work on those identified aspects to be changed and improved is underway. The task of various groups is to set about the hard work. Clark wants the "truth" to emerge, something I find mystifying. Is there some plot? Is the "truth" being hidden? What is this "truth" that needs to emerge? What needs to emerge is the componentry for a national curriculum framework and the statements for each of the components or sections. Let me reiterate what I said earlier: the development of any national curriculum involves political imperatives and compromises to accommodate the competing aspirations of many groups in society. The government has the final responsibility to provide for a broad, general education for all students. What is contained in that education is very much contestable. The contestability will never be fully resolved, at least not in a democracy like New Zealand. And nor should it.

I sense in Clark's criticism, a view that a national curriculum (made up of, in this case, a framework document and curriculum area statements) provide a precise determination of what is taught in schools. In my experience, there is, at best, an appropriate consistency. Teachers in schools interpret national documents in drawing up school plans and classroom programmes of teaching and learning. They interpret their own meanings of, for example, achievement objectives. They make selections about specific content to be covered, resources and learning activities. Therefore, there are probably reasonably wide differences across (and even within) schools when it comes to the relationship between national curriculum and classroom programmes and yet there are connections. This seems perfectly acceptable, providing that students receive a sound general education which develops certain skills and learning (as in learning to read) and other learning across a wide range of experiences (as in the arts). Thus, national curriculum should be a generalised blueprint which provides the basis for teacher decision-making. Accountability procedures are of course, needed to ensure that students are, indeed, receiving a "good" educational experience.

In the quest for the best possible national curriculum, it is important that as many people as possible have their say, including philosophers of education. I hope that John Clark volunteers his expertise to the work that is underway. Critique should be a process of identifying issues, including both strengths and shortcomings, and suggesting alterations and improvements and the retention of the already sound.

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